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NEWS RELEASE

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WILDERNESS STUDY GOES HIGH-TECH WITH UM'S INTERACTIVE INTERNET COURSE

MISSOULA --

The study of wilderness at The University of Montana has moved into a new frontier of unspoiled territory -- the World Wide Web.

This winter, Wilderness Institute Director Wayne Freimund launched UM's first interactive Internet course, communing via cyberspace with 23 students at the University of Minnesota—Crookston. The course, Management of Recreation Resources, will soon be available to federal and state land managers, conservation activists, and anyone else with a computer and the desire to learn.

"This is a wonderful opportunity for us to export something we have expertise in, and we can become a leader in this," said Perry Brown, dean of UM's School of Forestry. "This is an important experiment for the whole campus. We're building a model that others can adapt to their own needs."

Venturing onto the Internet as an instructor has been an eye-opening, intense experience, said Freimund. Three times a week, he and graduate student Steven Peel connect with Crookston students in a cyber-classroom, holding on-line conversations via an Internet "news group." They worked through Christmas break to coordinate the class with Crookston's winter quarter, which runs from early December through February.

Phil Baird, associate professor of natural resources at Crookston, coordinates the course on the Minnesota end of the Internet connection.

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The course is a great opportunity for the 1,500-student Crookston campus to give students access to resources and expertise far beyond its budget and boundaries, Baird said.

"Through the Internet, a small campus like (ours) can offer students the opportunity to take a course from some of the top people in the field," he said.

That ability to transcend a department or university's physical limitations is a key to the program's success and its "enormous potential," Brown said.

"There's absolutely no way everyone can afford to do everything," he said, noting that UM's Crookston connection presents a model for cooperation and shared resources between universities.

Freimund's course is one of six in the Wilderness Management Distance Education Program offered by UM's Center for Continuing Education in conjunction with the Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center. The other five courses are available via the Internet as scanned text, but plans call for interactive Internet versions in the near future, said Wendy Ninteman, natural resource management division manager for the Center for Continuing Education.

The wilderness Web courses are designed for federal land managers, city and state land and recreation planners, conservation organization members, educators, international wildland managers, and anyone interested in land stewardship.

Freimund said he will adapt his course to fit its diverse audiences. Rather than dealing separately with each student, he will develop a cohort of students and have them work together. That group interaction is one of the best features of the course, he said, setting it apart from the work-on-your-own model in which Internet classes are basically electronic correspondence courses.

Known as "Thinkpad U" for its initiative to have every student on line with a leased laptop

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computer, Crookston has a student body that's more electronically adept than most. But this course is opening up whole new vistas for those students, Baird said, noting that none of them had used news groups before for on-line discussion.

"This is a powerful tool for them," he said. "They're learning more electronic communication skills, and the more adept they are at these things the better suited they are to take advantage of opportunities that might arise."

"The next crop of students out of this program will not only know a lot about wilderness management," Freimund said, "but they will know a lot about getting information from different resources."

Student response to the course has been overwhelmingly positive, Baird said, noting that the delivery method chosen by Freimund and Peel is particularly engaging. Rather than delivering the electronic equivalent of lectures, the instructors present problem-solving exercises for each lesson. Students use the information from their study questions and readings to tackle the problems, sharing their ideas with the instructors and other students in a real-time computer conversation.

One scenario presented at a recent class meeting had students determine if, and under which circumstances, chainsaws should be permitted for use in wilderness areas.

Baird said he is investigating the possibility of requiring one or more UM distance learning courses as part of Crookston's park management program. And, he said, he plans to incorporate some of the course's delivery techniques into his on-campus classes.

The instructors enliven their presentations with graphics, photos and even a brief movie, Freimund said, noting, "if you can run it on your machine, they can see it."

Freimund and Peel man computers at UM, while their students sit in a Crookston classroom, inputting responses and questions on their laptops. All participants can communicate

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via keyboard; microphones at each site allow one person in each room -- generally Freimund and Baird -- to communicate verbally with their cross-country counterparts. They are experimenting with video technology that allows the people at each site to view their counterparts at the other.

To learn more about Freimund's course and UM's other Wilderness Management Distance Education Program offerings, call the Center for Continuing Education, (406) 243-4623, or visit the program's World Wide Web page at www.wilderness.umn.edu. The Web site for Freimund's course offers detailed lesson plans, study materials and links to other Web sites such as Glacier National Park.

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